

Wetlands project restores watershed

Pulaski County landowners enroll marginal farmland to enhance wildlife habitat

A wetland project in Pulaski County is giving the Natural Resources Conservation Service the opportunity to work with landowners to restore a large portion of the Pennington Bayou watershed.

"This is the first project in the U.S. where individual landowners formed a group to restore land to a wetland," said Mark Tidwell, a wildlife biologist at the Hazen Technical Service Center.

The 7,156 acre project, between Wrightsville and Woodson, includes 12 landowners. The project is in the planning stages and work will begin in June with the hydrology restoration.

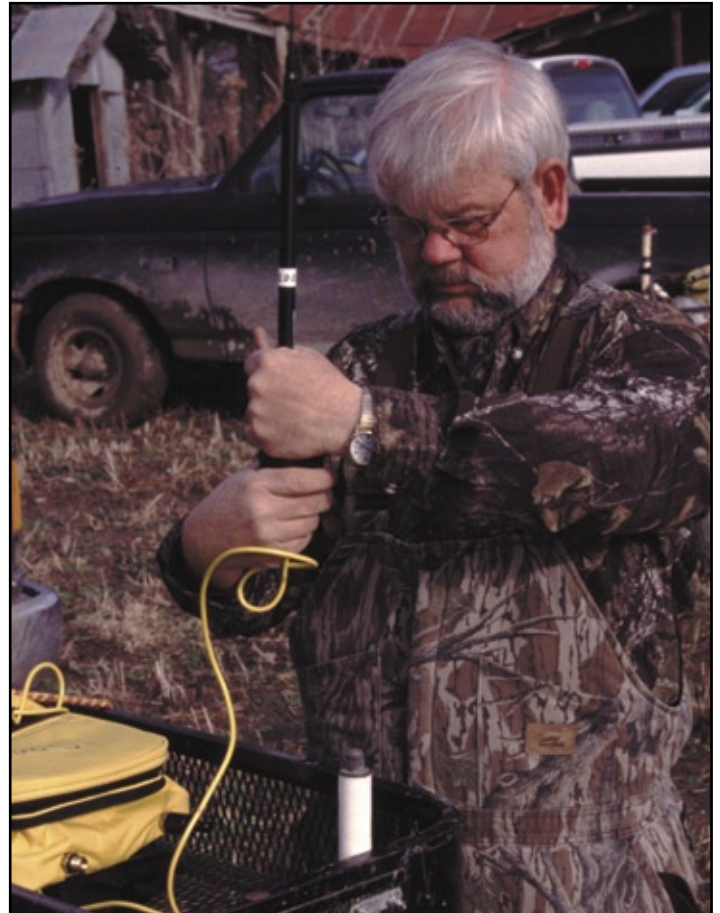
"We are extremely enthusiastic to see the work begin. The project will totally reconfigure marginal farmland and change it into recreational land that will greatly enhance wildlife habitat," said Gar Lile, who was the initial applicant with 1,140 acres. "We are taking non-irrigated farmland in the Arkansas River corridor and returning it to its natural state."

Work began in December 2002, with a survey of the entire Woodson area - 8,417 acres.

"With the number of houses, roads and the amount of land not in the easement, we surveyed the entire area to ensure we wouldn't flood land not in the project," Tidwell said.



The workhorse of the data collection, the Trimble data collector, allows the user to electronically collect the data necessary for topo surveys on the WRP site.



Photos by Creston Shrum

James Harness, a civil engineering technician at the Lonoke Irrigation Office, attaches a radio antenna to his four-wheeler.

"To accomplish this we used eight GPS survey rover units from NRCS and two from the Audubon of Arkansas," he said. "The bulk of the survey was completed in six days."

"Our first restoration will include constructing levees and installing pipes to create shallow water. Tree plantings will begin in the fall of 2004," Tidwell said.

"Once the project is complete we will have 2,100 acres of shallow and permanent water areas, 250 acres of native grasses and more than 3,500 acres of trees," he said.

"We have enough data on the forest of the Arkansas River that we can go into the Woodson easement and recreate a representative forest type that once existed in the Arkansas River valley lowlands," Tidwell said.

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2003 Wetlands Reserve Program

Overview

The Wetlands Reserve Program is a voluntary program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore and enhance wetlands on their property. Restoring, protecting and enhancing the functions and values of wetland ecosystems remain the focus of Wetlands Reserve Program in Arkansas.

Specifically, the focus is narrowed in Arkansas to restoring bottomland hardwood forest ecosystems and improvement of water quality in the Lower Mississippi River Valley through reforestation and hydrology restoration.

WRP participants benefit by:

- ♦ Receiving financial and technical assistance in return for restoring and protecting wetland functions and values;
- ♦ Seeing a reduction in problems associated with farming potentially difficult areas; and
- ♦ Having incentives to develop wildlife recreational opportunities on their land.

Wetlands benefit the nation by providing fish and wildlife habitat; improving water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals; reducing flooding; recharging ground water; protecting biological diversity; and providing educational, scientific, and recreational activities.

Arkansas is currently ranked second in the nation in enrolled Wetlands Reserve Program acres. This equals approximately 149,049 active acres of Wetlands Reserve Program lands enrolled with approximately 39,000 acres of shallow water habitat created and 80,000 acres of reforested lands.

Accomplishments

By placing agricultural lands into Wetlands Reserve Program, the Natural Resources Conservation Service provides resting, loafing and foraging habitat for migratory waterfowl, songbirds, shorebirds, wading birds and other wetland species.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service in Arkansas is a national leader in developing new techniques for restoring and managing wetland complexes, using the latest technology to annually reforest 8,000 acres of bottomland hardwoods and restore hydrology on more than 6,000 acres.

The 2003 hydrology construction season was an especially productive time for Arkansas. Field staff completed a record 7,700 acres of shallow water habitat in a single construction year.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service in Arkansas takes great pride in contributing to the many species of water birds observed on Wetlands Reserve Program lands. Many of these species have not been reported since



the turn of the century or have never been documented in the state.

Outlook

The improvement of water quality as a value of wetlands and wetland restoration is an often overlooked benefit of the Wetlands Reserve Program. Enrolling large contiguous tracts of erosion-prone farmland has greatly decreased sediment in major rivers such as the White and Black rivers in central Arkansas.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service in Arkansas also sees great potential in enrolling more acreage statewide in the Wetlands Reserve Program as the 2002 Farm Bill progresses.

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